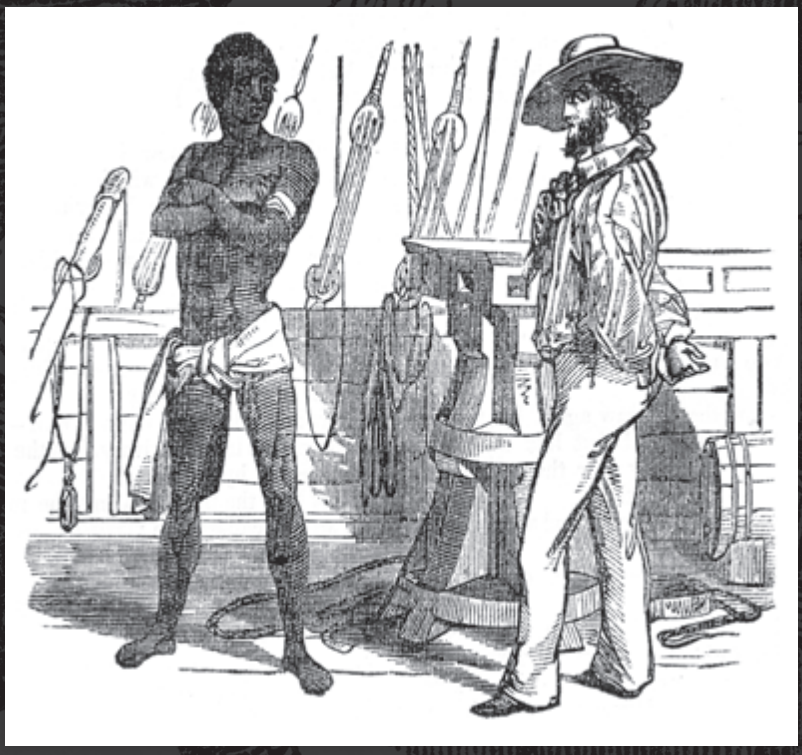
THE FRENCH ATLANTIC TRIANGLE

Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade



CHRISTOPHER L. MILLER

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Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade

Christopher L. Miller

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For Christopher Rivers

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PREFACE

The French slave trade forced more than one million Africans across the Atlantic to the islands of the Caribbean. No one knows exactly how many, nor do we know how many died in the process—in Africa, on the ocean, or thereafter. This triangular trade defined relations between France, Africa, and the New World and allowed France to establish the richest single colony on Earth (Saint-Domingue, later Haiti). Yet the impact of the French slave trade on the wider culture of France and its colonies has remained gravely underexamined. This book is, first and foremost, about the French Atlantic slave trade, its representations and its aftermath, in literature and film from France, Africa, and the Caribbean. The subject proves difficult to contain: by its nature it spans the oceans and creates ripple effects in both time and space. I have tried to follow those ripples wherever they may flow, around the ocean and through the centuries. The broader consequences of the slave trade, both visible and invisible, are found today all around the Atlantic, in representations ranging from the historically explicit to the explicitly fictional. This study seeks, insofar as is possible, to cover that range, with a principal emphasis on the contributions of creative fiction.

As a subject of inquiry the slave trade cannot help but cast a horrific, negative light on the vogue in postcolonial studies for the celebration of encounter, movement, and hybridity. In the context of the slave trade, encounter meant war and capture; movement was a forced march in chains and a Middle Passage without return; hybridity came from rape. In this case the field of intercultural inquiry—the study of how cultures define themselves in relation to each other—is inarguably built on a foundation of radical inequality and exploitation unto death. My goal in this study is not, however, to make any particular point about theory; rather it is to read history, literature, and film together.

During the period of the slave trade, French literature, understood here in the largest sense of the term, manifested every possible attitude toward a problem that was increasingly difficult to ignore: from blithe ignorance (Rousseau), through ironic, somewhat hypocritical critique (Voltaire), to outright protest (Olympe de Gouges). Literature was one of the most important battlegrounds for the debate on slavery, race, and trade. For lack of authentic slave narratives in French (there were none), writers made them up. To read the broader *littérature négrière* now—some of it well known, some obscure—is, to a large extent, to marvel at the ability of France to keep the problem of slavery out of sight and out of mind. The struggle to bring down the wall of ignorance, to make the plight of the slaves real to metropolitan French people, was the nearly impossible task of the abolitionists. But abolitionism in metropolitan France was, more often than not, tinged with irony and ambivalence; after all, it was England—perfidious Albion—that was so obsessed with abolishing the slave trade. The French literary texts examined in this study will show the full span of that ambivalence, as well as the anemic nature of French abolitionist thought, which followed a twisted path, full of switchbacks, roughly from 1748 (the publication of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*) to 1848 (the final abolition of slavery in the French colonies).

The French Atlantic Triangle flows from a desire to consider metropolitan France and the "Francophone" polities that used to constitute the French Empire within the same analytical field; to break down the barrier that has tended to treat the literatures produced in these different spheres as if they were of separate "species."[1] Although it has been common to discuss literature of the former colonies as an outgrowth of French culture, and although the Negritude movement worked to rebuild the broken link between Africa and the Caribbean, it has been very rare for critics to look at the French Atlantic as a whole. That is my intent. The Atlantic slave trade and plantation colonialism brought Europe and Africa together, and the spawn of these two parents—the Creole cultures of the New World—have had plenty to say about both the slave trade and the Old World since then. As much as possible, then, this book is structured to reflect a broad, "circum-Atlantic" view, thus bringing Mérimée into dialogue with Boubacar Boris Diop and Dorothy Dandridge; Madame de Duras with Edouard Glissant; and Voltaire with Césaire. *The French Atlantic Triangle* is organized around a roughly chronological progression but with comparative flashes forward and backward in time.

The state of scholarship about the French slave trade has improved considerably during the years of my research, which began in 2000. Even before that, plenty of information was available but only in specialized contexts; it was not widely circulated or considered. The word *taboo* continues to be invoked almost unanimously by those who venture into this subject matter. France's general culture—so steeped in certain specific versions of its own history and so committed to the celebration of the Republic and its universal values—continues to display considerable ignorance about its own past. A few quick illustrations make this clear. In 2005 the well-meaning, left-of-center newspaper *Libération* published an article on the reluctance of the city of Bordeaux to acknowledge its slave-trading past—thereby documenting the type of repression of memory that I am discussing here. But the article also stated as fact that slaves purchased in Africa "passed through," or "transited" through, the port cities of Bordeaux (150,000 of them) and Nantes (450,000).[2] As if the French Atlantic slave trade had worked by systematically bringing slaves first to France and then to the New World; this is utterly false.[3] That such an error could find its way into print in a leading national newspaper is a reflection of a larger problem.

To take a different example: Pierre Nora's monumental set of seven tomes on French historical memory, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, published in 1984, contains not one essay about the slave trade or slavery—both being, in effect, *lieux d'oubli*. Marking some progress, the eight hundred pages of Marc Ferro's *Le Livre noir du colonialisme* (2003), include thirty pages on the slave trade and slavery, although about half are devoted to the American South.[4] The French government's official recognition of slavery and the slave trade as crimes in 2001 certainly reflects a leap forward, and the first annual day for the commemoration of slavery and the slave trade in 2006 brought forth significant discussion and observance. Still, despite the good intentions of many and the hard work of certain scholars and activists, France has much to do to overcome the most influential and lingering factor in its (mis)understanding of the history of its own empire: the colonies and the slaves were out of sight and out of mind.[5]

Part 1 of this book is intended to be a work of critical synthesis. It provides an overview of the French slave trade for readers who have not studied this history. It represents a reading of the history and the historiography of the French slave trade, thus relying on both original sources and the work of historians. In addition, I found it necessary to delve into certain problems that called for closer examination—certain blind spots, myths, and riddles

pertaining to the French slave trade, its vocabulary, its origins, and its representations.

Part 2 was originally intended to be a short critique of an important critical anthology edited by Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, *Translating Slavery*, which proposes a feminist interpretation of abolitionism in France, working through the lens of "translation." My engagement with that book and with the authors it covered (and did not cover) grew in size and complexity as an interwoven set of problems emerged. The three authors anthologized in *Translating Slavery*—Olympe de Gouges, Germaine de Staël, and Claire de Duras—are key figures in the history of French *littérature négrière*, as my chapters on them will attempt to show. Most significant, I argue, we must recognize the slave trade as itself an act of translation, and we should continually question the role of gender.

Part 3, by contrast, deals with male authors of the French Restoration who, coincidentally or not, were less sympathetic toward the victims of the slave trade than the female authors discussed in part 2. Although I differ from Doris Kadish and the other contributors to *Translating Slavery* in my interpretation of this gendered shift, I do not hesitate to place it within the context that Margaret Cohen has described as a "hostile takeover" of sentimental literature by men. The other thread that runs through both parts 2 and 3 is that of the remarkable economic and social ties that linked these authors to each other and often linked their families to the slave trade. Having organized these two parts along gender lines, I was still somewhat surprised to discover the extent to which questions of sexuality and homosociality imposed themselves as preoccupations among male authors like Eugène Sue and Edouard Corbière.

Part 4 leaps forward to the post-slave-trade era of the twentieth century and the rise of Francophone literature and film. Now the other points on the triangle—Africa and the Caribbean—are heard from, but the result is neither a perfect symmetry of literary "replies" nor a complete rectification of history. Césaire responds to Mérimée but goes far beyond him; Maryse Condé, in *Hérémakhonon*, describes an Atlantic vision that is both derived from the slave trade and truly a product of its own postcolonial times. Still, African and Caribbean writers have not been able to tell the story of the slave trade fully or transparently. The presence of signs of this history in Africa and the Caribbean—on Gorée Island or in the memorials of Martinique—does not mean that everything about it can be known and disclosed. Glissant more than anyone is at pains to remind us that the captives' experience

exceeds the outer limits of representability. The alleged "silence" of African writers—a silence that is in fact rather noisy—concludes this study.

To save space and gain room for analysis, I have, with regret, eliminated most of the original French quotations in this book. All translations from French are mine unless otherwise indicated. I have marked "AT" (altered translation) the published translations that I have found necessary to alter.

An abridged version of chapter 8 appears in the volume *Approaches to Teaching Duras's "Ourika"* (New York: Modern Language Association, forthcoming).

Chapter 10 is based on a paper delivered at the conference "Les Antilles littéraires: Représentation des Antilles, de la traite et de l'esclavage chez les écrivains et les voyageurs du XIXe siècle," Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, March 20–21, 1998. An article version was published under the title, "Forget Haiti: Baron Roger and the New Africa," in *Yale French Studies* 107 (spring 2005).

I regret that timing did not allow me to include references to a book that is closely related to this one: *Claims to Memory: Beyond Slavery and Emancipation in the French Caribbean* by Catherine A. Reinhardt (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006). Reinhardt deals with questions of slavery and emancipation in the second half of the eighteenth century, organized as a series of "realms of memory." Her last chapter examines the memorialization of slavery in the contemporary French Caribbean.

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Most important, I am grateful to my partner and legally married spouse, Chris Rivers, who contributed to my thinking in all aspects of this project and offered indispensable advice. I thank him for his insight, support, and love.

ABBREVIATIONS

A	*Alzire, ou les Américains*
AG	Eugène Sue, *Atar-Gull* (1993 Laffont edition)
AT	"Altered Translation" [indicates author's alteration of a published translation]
C	Liliane Crété, *La Traite des nègres sous l'ancien régime*
D	Serge Daget, *La Traite des Noirs*
DBD1	David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*
DBD2	David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*
DBD3	David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*
DN	Ousmane Sembene, *Le Docker noir*
E	David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*
EN	Olympe de Gouges, *L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou l'heureux naufrage*
EP	Olympe de Gouges, *Ecrits politiques, 1788–1791*
FH	Gregory S. Brown, *A Field of Honor*
H	Maryse Condé, *Hérémakhonon*
K	Jacques-François Roger, *Kelédor*
LI	Edouard Glissant, *Les Indes*
MJM	Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, ed., *Moi, Joseph Mosneron, armateur négrier nantais (1748–1833)*
N	Edouard Corbière, *Le Négrier* (Baudinière edition, 1979 [conforms to the 1834 edition])
N 1832	Edouard Corbière, *Le Négrier* (first edition, 1832 [2 vols.])
N 1834	Edouard Corbière, *Le Négrier* (Dénain and Delamare edition, 1834 [4 vols.])

N 1990	Edouard Corbière, *Le Négrier* (Klincksieck edition, 1990)
ODG	Olivier Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges*
OE	Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*
OJ	Madame de Staël, *Oeuvres de jeunesse*
PG	Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *La Traite des Noirs*
PM	Prosper Mérimée, *Théâtre de Clara Gazul, romans et nouvelles* (Pléiade edition, 1978)
PS	G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*
QS	Edouard Glissant, *Le Quatrième siècle*
RMD	Madame la Baronne Staël de Holstein, *Recueil de morceaux détachés*
S	Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century*
SAL	Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life*
Sar	Edouard Glissant, *Sartorius*
SAST	Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*
SOC	*Oeuvres complètes de Madame la Baronne de Staël-Holstein* (Slatkine edition, 1967)
T	Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade*
TS	Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, eds., *Translating Slavery*
VOC	Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*
WC	William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans*
ZM	Olympe de Gouges, *Zamore et Mirza, ou l'heureux naufrage*

I

THE FRENCH ATLANTIC

INTRODUCTION

Examine the situations of all the peoples of the universe. They are set up in such a way that they appear to depend on nothing, yet they depend on everything. Everything is a cog, a pulley, a cord, a spring in this immense machine. In the physical universe it is the same. A wind that blows from the depths of Africa and from the southern seas brings with it a part of the African atmosphere, which falls as rain in the valleys of the Alps; those rains enrich our lands; and our northern wind in its turn sends our vapors to the Negroes. *We do good to Guinea, and Guinea does good to us. The chain stretches from one end of the universe to the other.*

—VOLTAIRE, "Chaîne ou génération des événements" (1764)

Man is born free, yet everywhere lives in chains.

—ROUSSEAU, *Du Contrat social* (1762)

THE SLAVE TRADE AND ITS BORDERS

The Atlantic triangle was invented by a system of trades, following a certain pattern. The French version of the Atlantic, perhaps more than any other, was triangular in its configuration. The Atlantic triangle was traced onto the earth and into world culture by men and women and ships, moving goods to Africa, captive Africans to the New World, and colonial products back to the mother countries. The forced migration of more than eleven million Africans to the New World presents a tremendous challenge to memory—but not only to memory: to ethics, politics, and, most of all, justice. The effects of the triangle are inscribed on the ground of Gorée

Island in Senegal, in the remains of the plantations of Martinique and Haiti, on the luxurious facades of Nantes and Bordeaux—and in the economic inequities of the postcolonial world. The impact of the slave trade remains with us today in more ways than one can count, for it truly created a "new world."

My goal in this book is to think about what I will call the French Atlantic: France, parts of Africa, and the French islands of the Caribbean, with occasional references beyond, to Louisiana and to the Indian Ocean.[1] I want to think of this as a whole in which the various parts are interpreted in relation to each other: France in relation to Africa, Africa in relation to the Caribbean, and so on. These multiple relations are reflected and refracted in literary texts, images, films, and a variety of other documents ranging from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. My hypothesis is that the infamous, slave-based "triangular trade" created a powerful sweep of forces moving around the Atlantic and that traces of those forces have survived abolitions, independences, and "departmentalizations." At the same time, the figure of the triangle is not all-encompassing: as a mercantilist plan it could not be fully enforced over time and space, and as a projection of the French nation-state it invited resistance from within, below, and outside. So considerable attention is due to the individuals, groups, modes of thought, and political forces that escaped the logic of the triangle and the state—or tried to. Through a reading of numerous texts, emanating from different points of the French (and Francophone) Atlantic, I hope to shed light both on the reality of the triangular system and on modes and moments of its undoing.

That the *official* French slave trade was predominantly triangular is a matter of both historical record and geographical inevitability. Any vessel leaving France to move slaves from Africa to the Caribbean, once it returned home, would have traced a rough triangle spanning the Atlantic from north to south, from east to west, and then back. We will see that the mercantilist doctrine of the *Exclusif* established by Colbert, banning trade with other empires, solidified the triangle and made it the only legitimate pattern of trade. Herbert S. Klein warns against the "myth" of the triangular trade, but what he dismisses is the idea that each slave-trading vessel completed the full triangle in economic terms, perfectly balancing its books and possibly turning a profit. That is indeed a myth. But the triangle, we will see, remains

both a fact on the ground (on the ocean) and an internalized cultural logic. There were other triangles (Newport–West Africa–Barbados; the cod-fish triangle France–Newfoundland–Mediterranean) and other polygons (as when the Atlantic triangle was illegally made into a quadrilateral by trade between the French planters of the Caribbean and British North America). The Atlantic could be constructed according to other, multidirectional or "crosshatched," logics, in which meanings might "circulat[e] promiscuously"; the French Atlantic in the time of the slave trade did not tend to be one of those.[2] It will be important here to pay attention to various mitigations of the triangle but equally important to recognize its forms of predominance. The phrase *commerce triangulaire* (or *trafic triangulaire*), referring to the Atlantic economy based on the slave trade, is commonplace in French.[3]

The triangle will therefore be not only the dominant figure here but, perhaps inevitably, a figure of dominance itself. The triangle is a sign of power—and of the direct contestation of power; it is the shape both of the slave trade and—to take a leap that cannot be avoided—of the Oedipus complex. It suggests a logic of ineluctable, "eternal" relationships: father, mother, offspring—terms that in the cultural logic of colonialism translate into Europe, Africa, and the New World. The history of colonialism is rife with metaphors casting Europe in the role of father, Africa as mother (an idea supported by the ideology of Negritude), and the new *creole* (from Spanish *criar*, to breed, to raise) colonies as children.[4] Aimé Césaire wrote of the West Indian as "the bastard of Europe and Africa, torn between this father who denies him and this mother he denies."[5] That triangulated family romance—set up by the slave trade—is at the heart of our concerns here.

But the very persistence of the triangle has incited certain artists to think outside its lines and to seek other logics. In a text that informs the basis of this project, Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*), the triangle is plainly evident—the inescapable armature of thought about relations between Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean in the wake of the slave trade and slavery. The "negritude" that Césaire invented in that poem—an idea that is often misrepresented these days as a simplistic vision of a lost African paradise—was partially (but not entirely) an attempt to renegotiate a triangle that appeared to be so powerful that it could never be imagined out of existence. Césaire sought to renavigate the triangle according to a logic of indirect return (to Africa, but via France, its institutions, its language, and its literature). That reinvented triangle—Caribbean, France, Africa—is often represented as an ideological formula,

a prescription on Césaire's part, and certain passages of the *Cahier* seem to support this. Yet there is another logic at work in the poem: the thought of a spiral that spins and rises above the triangle, culminating in the final word of the poem, *verrition*. A neologism rooted in the Latin *verri* or *vertere*, to sweep, to spin or (most relevantly) to scan, *veerition* (as it has been translated) encapsulates the logic of escape, of the marooned slave who finds refuge in the forest.[6] Yet this word also conjures thoughts of sweeping away the triangle and of escaping into a wholly different logic, free from the violently imposed relationships of the triangle. *Vertere* also means to overturn, overthrow, destroy, so it is in a sense an act of veerition when the captives in the hold of the slave ship, at the dramatic climax of the poem, rise up in revolt and free themselves. "Veerition" might be that other logic: a spiral rising above the triangle, leaving it behind. As we will see later in this study, that would be consistent with Césaire's reinvention of Mérimée's "Tamango," a key tale of revolt on a slave ship.[7]

Too bad that Césaire only offers the possibility of escape within a mind-boggling oxymoron: it is not simply "veerition" that he gives us at the very end of the *Cahier*—sweeping us into redemption—but "*immobile* veerition." He leaves us to wonder if there is any real escape from the triangle, whether there is any viable alternative. It may turn out that the logic of the triangle and that of "veerition" are implicit in each other. Later in this study, the task of my chapter on the *Cahier* will be to read Césaire's interpretations of the inherited logic of the slave trade and to explore his mixed feelings about the possibility of escape.

At its most basic, this book is concerned with interpretations of space as they have evolved through time. Apprehensions of geographical space both help to explain history and affect what is done to create history.[8] European powers created the Atlantic system, putting in place what was in effect a vast triangular machine in which slave labor played an essential role. Their ability to shape the Atlantic came from their prowess as mariners, and it allowed them to see what they wanted to see. This selective vision in turn made it thinkable to base their new Atlantic economy on servitude and slavery—even as some within the European seats of power began to undermine philosophically the basis of slavery. My epigraphs from Voltaire and Rousseau illustrate this tension. These two thinkers loom large over any attempt to understand how the French eighteenth century could be, on the one hand,

so deeply involved in the slave trade and, on the other, so productive of the ideas that would later abolish that trade, produce revolutions, and enable, as Giovanni Arrighi puts it, "a thorough transformation of ruler-subject relations throughout the Americas and in most of Europe"[9]—and later, less thoroughly, lead to decolonization in Africa.

It was during the eighteenth century that the majority of slaves were exported from Africa. Slavery and servitude had always been a part of the social order in both Europe and Africa in one form or another. It was in fact one of those "wheels, pulleys, ropes, and springs"—in Voltaire's words—that held the world together. In "Chaîne ou génération des événements" Voltaire celebrates what we might now call globalization: the amazing interdependence of far-flung elements. Voltaire's cheerful invocation of Africa as a place that is linked to France is very strange, and I don't believe he was really thinking of the weather. He knew perfectly well that it was not the weather but the slave trade that was the "pulley" bringing Africa and Europe together in an "immense machine." His metaphor, a chain, to suggest the links between peoples throughout the world, is a singularly unhappy choice. For in Voltaire's times (and, for a time, with his investments) some were more enchained than others. In his enthusiasm for global connectedness Voltaire shows his ability to ignore the inconvenient fact of African servitude.[10] He is typical of his era: the idea of a "Great Chain of Beings" was commonplace in the eighteenth century, while great chains were being applied to hundreds of thousands of Africans.[11]

Rousseau, in the epigraph, sounds like he recognizes the evil of slavery in this famous opening of the *Social Contract*, yet he too ignores the Atlantic slave trade, as he does throughout his vast writings, with one tiny exception. He makes slavery a metaphor for the condition of man in *modern* (which means European) society. This gesture dominates the Enlightenment's treatment of the theme of slavery, and the technique of "making-metaphorical" will require further examination. Those who are *literally* enchained do not enter his thinking here. Both Voltaire and Rousseau, even as they struggled to think their way out of various forms of oppressive dogma, were, each in his own way, barely interested in African slavery. Their indifference must be considered representative of one of the conditions that allowed for the turning of the machine of enslavement around and around the Atlantic in their times. Perhaps, to follow Orlando Patterson's general theory about slavery and freedom, the enslavement of Africans by Europeans was not simply a blind spot in the minds of the philosophes; perhaps "the joint rise

of slavery [for Africans] and cultivation of freedom [for Europeans] was no accident."[12] What I will call an *economy* held slavery and freedom together in a compromising tangle of relationships. Rousseau himself puzzled over this in the *Social Contract*: "Could it be that freedom is only maintained through the support of servitude? Perhaps. The two extremes meet."[13]

Among the methodological hunches that I am making about the French Atlantic is the idea of following the money. As we will see, it was rarely cash that flowed around the ocean, but exchanges of valued objects — of everything from cloths and cowry shells to human beings — created the Atlantic. To follow the flow of those values is to see the emergence of a vast system that defied all borders. What were the boundaries of the slave trade? Where did its reach end? Trade goods produced in Europe were exchanged for captives in Africa. Cowries — the "shell money of the slave trade" — were taken from the Maldive Islands in the Indian Ocean to Europe as ballast, then shipped to Africa and used as currency for buying slaves; circulated widely in Africa and incorporated into ritual practices, some of those shells now adorn African art, which itself now circulates throughout the world.[14] If, as Patrick Manning asserts, "all of African society, not just a privileged elite, was compromised in the slave trade" — because everyone relied on the various forms of currency or trade goods that the trade brought in — and if, as Boubacar Barry writes, "The entire [Senegambian] society was intimately involved in the slave holding system," does the same model of general permeability not apply to European society, and American?[15] If those statements are true, then the Atlantic triangle looks like a conspiracy in which the elites of Europe, Africa, and the Americas collaborated (unequally) to exploit the labor of enslaved Africans.

The Atlantic slave trade was connected to the Arab or "Oriental" slave trade (both across the Sahara and east to the Indian Ocean), and both exporting systems fed on the trade in slaves that took place among sub-Saharan Africans themselves.[16] Ships plying the direct route back and forth between France and the Caribbean on the *commerce en droiture*, although they were not carrying slaves, were part of an economy that was wholly dependent on slavery, and those ships, as I will explain, were necessary to recuperate the full value of the slaves brought to the New World. This was a "world system."[17]

These are the pulleys, ropes, and springs of the Atlantic economy, and

they obviously reach far into Europe, Africa, and the New World. Money—value in general—is fungible, and the wealth created by the slave trade flowed far and wide at the time of the trade, beyond anyone's ability to trace; it drove the Atlantic triangle but also sometimes defied it by flowing in illegitimate directions. The *Exclusif*, a doctrine of the centralized French state, sought to enforce a logic of *centripetal trade*—which is something of an oxymoron. An initial, centrifugal gesture disperses capital outward (to Africa and across the Atlantic to the New World) but within triangular paths sanctioned by the central State. Everything flows around and eventually returns to the center: that is mercantilism, the pattern dictated by the *Exclusif*. As Ian Baucom writes, "Expansion contracts . . . [and] contraction enriches."[18] In other words, the expansion of European power makes the world smaller, which in turn helps to propel the return of capital and profits to Europe. We know, however, that such logics can rarely maintain complete power or consistent profitability: the triangular trade did *not* always bring the returns it was supposed to (and was capable of, particularly in the early years). A healthy illegal trade—the *interlope*—was practiced outside the lines of the official triangle. Expansion did not always "contract" the way that Colbert, for example, wanted it to. Braudel describes how money can work: "The economy, all-invading, mingling together currencies and commodities, tended to promote unity [or perhaps promiscuity?] of a kind in a world where everything else seemed to be conspiring to create clearly-distinguished blocs."[19] In other words, money has a perverse centrifugal power even as an imperial nation-state might try to control its flow centripetally. So where are the boundaries of the slave trade? They cannot be demarcated, and this is consequently a subject without neat borders.

One of the porous boundaries that defines this subject is the one between the slave trade and slavery itself. Some historians insist that the two "must not be confused."[20] They are indeed different systems, and they were abolished separately: early abolitionists strategically advocated banning the trade alone, as a first step. Yet, in an excess of methodological purity, to ignore slavery in a study of the slave trade would be to shut out the most important determinant. There could be no slave trade without slavery, yet slavery continued after the end of the slave trade. Clearly the two institutions or systems were inseparable, since each fed and perpetuated the other. And, as I will discuss below, what we know and don't know about the trade,

from the slaves' perspective especially, comes to us through the institution of slavery and particularly its control of literacy. Often in the course of this study it will be necessary to discuss French slavery in order to understand the French slave trade.

The general problem of borderlessness also has consequences for the interpretation of the literature and film. The frame of analysis—often established as a set of criteria from which various judgments can then flow (national, racial, ethnic, or sexual identity, to cite the most obvious examples)—in this case is highly fluid. We are contemplating the attempt of a nation-state to control the transnational flow of value, to keep that flow within a pattern that would benefit the French state: the triangle. The works that we will read here will both adhere to and undermine that effort. The challenge will therefore be to read these texts "Atlantically," or perhaps (in Joseph Roach's phrase) "circum-Atlantically," placing them in, as much as possible, the full context of their time and in their proper, highly complex, place(s). This will therefore be an exercise in *intercultural* interpretation.[21]

What do literature and money have in common? They are both figures of desire—as a force for transformation and transmigration, desire to have something (or something more) or to be somewhere else. The slave trade combined these two: traders had to go somewhere (or send others, their agents) in order to (they hoped) get rich. Capitalist greed, romantic longing, and exoticist esthetics all reflect a quest and a desire. For the slave traders the object was money; for the Africans they brought to the New World the object was their lost native land and the thirst for return, often expressed in literature.

Contemplating the literature of the slave trade and its economies of desire, we might do well to keep in mind Deleuze's and Guattari's critique of desire as lack, which they say is characteristic of something they happen to call a "slave morality"—reactive and antilife. If lack (*manque*) is "created, planned and organized through social production," then it is obvious that the slave trade itself was, to say the least, a machine for creating this negative type of desire.[22] But, following a philosophical tradition that we will see in Rousseau, Deleuze and Guattari stigmatize the slave as they deploy the *metaphor* of slavery for a problem that they conceive within the bounds of Western thought. Readers of Deleuze and Guattari are called on to set aside the shackles of "slave morality" and free themselves from desire-as-lack in favor of desire-as-affirmation.[23] In this study I want to ask about the literal

slaves themselves within the context of an economy that was not simply non-life-affirming but actually built on death: what were *their* desires, as they labored for the fulfillment of the desires of those who claimed to own them? The flow and interchange of desire around the Atlantic—the "economy" of desire—as lack, affirmation, or ambivalence will be the object of this study.[24]

TRAITE AND TRADE

What are we saying when we use the word *trade* or, in French, *traite*? The French term defining the relations among the different parts and places in this scheme has no exact equivalent in English, although in *traite des Noirs*, *traite négrière*, or *traite des nègres*, it translates easily enough as "trade." But the French term contains important ambiguities that should not be ignored. The slave trade was the principal motor that propelled ships, persons, and values around the Atlantic. The word *traite*, even standing alone, came to be associated with the Atlantic slave trade at an early date; Furetière gave as one definition of *traitte* in 1690: "Traffic, commerce with Savages. . . . One goes to Senegal for the *trade* in Negroes" (*Dictionnaire universel*). The etymology of the noun *traite* contains a significant surprise: its appearance suggests that it must come from the verb *traiter*, meaning to treat or to deal with; slave traders in fact used that verb to describe the action of trading. But *traite* derived originally from another verb, *traire*, meaning to draw out, to extract, or to milk (*Robert* dictionary, 1985).[25] Etymologically, *traite* in the sense of milking suggests a transaction requiring two parties, one of which is the active partner taking from the other; desire or the ability to realize desire (that is to say, the power) is all on one side. Historian Joseph Miller identifies the years from 1500 to 1800 as the "extraction-based" period in the history of the Atlantic slave trade.[26]

Trade in English suggests something more reciprocal ("the buying and selling or exchange of commodities for profit" [*OED*]). The early slave trader Jean (or John) Barbot (himself both French and English) judged the Africans he encountered on the coast according to whether or not they were *traitables*: tractable, manageable, accommodating; people he could do business with.[27] The economics of *traite* (extraction) are far different from those of trade: the early-twentieth-century colonial exploitation of Africa is cited as an example of a "milking economy," and extraction is of course associated

with the quest for oil in today's global economy.[28] However, etymology is not history. Historians now believe that *la traite des esclaves* did in fact work as a trade, as an economy of exchange according to "rational" sets of prices, and not as a pure extraction or theft of Africans from Africa by Europeans. This is not to say that the slave trade was an *equal* exchange by any reckoning that makes sense to us now—far from it. But pure extraction or theft was not its usual method.

So the phrase *traite des Noirs* contains ambiguities about the nature of the business that went on in the slave trade, and I would suggest that those ambiguities constitute a problem of desire as it relates to power. Who was able to realize their desires, to *draw out* the objects of their desire—and according to what framework of power?[29] And to what extent did an economy of exchange impinge on a desire for extraction?

The title-page engraving in Le Sieur Froger's travel account of 1695 to 1697 (see figure 1) depicts the ambiguities of power and exchange that Europeans and Africans must have felt in each other's presence in the early years. An imposing African leader reclines, at ease but armed, as a European approaches solicitously with offerings (no doubt the *coutume* that was required before trade could open). The African in the middle holds a bolt of checkered cloth, from which his shirt has been fashioned: it could be a West African kente type cloth, or it could be a European imitation thereof known as "Guinea cloth," purchased from an earlier visitor. Some single garments could be used to purchase one prime male slave (T, 322, 319). But no slaves are in sight here: the most valued commodity in the African-European trade is left out. This engraving idealizes "trade" as fair exchange. Yet in the bay lurks a sign of inequality, a European weapon of mass destruction: a ship.

The other significant implication of the word *traite* is movement: the word is used in expressions describing uninterrupted movement: *aller d'une traite*, *lire d'une seule traite*.[30] The French Atlantic was established and built around the slave trade, as a basically triangular set of *traites*: of trajectories, of things and people drawn across the space of the ocean. Within the vastness of that universe of exchanges, trades, and *traites*, my focus will be on impulses of desire that reach across the Atlantic and around the triangle, and, when possible, on texts that rather explicitly contemplate the broadest implications of the slave trade. The subject itself has no borders and cannot be fully apprehended or treated exhaustively, but printed texts and films that deal with the subject can be read, analyzed, and compared. The principal ar-

1 A French view of trade on the coast of Africa in the seventeenth century. From Le Sieur Froger, *Relation du voyage de Mr. De Gennes au detroit de Magellan* (Paris: Chez N. de Fer, 1698). Detail of title page. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

tifacts that I will examine in this study will all reflect a transatlantic desire, a sense of place that is inflected or haunted by another place: this is the culture created by the Creole societies of the New World, with their sense of an origin located across the sea, in either continent of the Old World. France, Africa, and the Caribbean came to be joined in a web of interlocking desires—negative, affirmative, and ambiguous by turns and in constant flux. This cannot be analyzed *d'une seule traite*.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ATLANTIC TRIANGLE

The eighteenth century was the heyday of the Atlantic slave trade. Two-thirds of all slaves were brought to the New World in that century; 80 percent of all French slave-trading voyages took place in that period.[31] But the origins of the triangle are much older. In a sense it was Columbus, the "inventor" of the Atlantic, who laid the groundwork for the triangular trade:

he had sailed to Africa—on routes already well established by the Portuguese—in 1482. When he went to the Americas and returned to Europe, he was thus already completing a triangle.[32] By 1460, sugar was being produced by African slave labor on the Atlantic island of Madeira—where Columbus lived for more than ten years (T, 70, 87; DBD3, 62). The combination of slaves and sugar that would transform the Caribbean and drive the triangular trade had already been formulated on the Atlantic islands, which David Brion Davis calls "crucibles of New World institutions" (DBD3, 61). Columbus took sugar plants with him to his new world—and by that gesture literally planted the seeds of slavery. And if it is true that he took enslaved Africans to the West Indies as well, he can be said to have transferred the mode of production in which slaves were used to produce sugar from one side of the Atlantic to the other himself.[33] When Columbus came along, then, the Atlantic was ready for a commerce based on the exchange of enslaved human beings—at least two hundred years before that commerce reached its "perfected" form. Thus, as W. E. B. Du Bois put it, "the rape of Africa began and transformed the world."[34]

In Giovanni Arrighi's analysis of mercantilism there are three components: "settler colonialism, capitalist slavery, and economic nationalism," and slavery was "partly a condition and partly a result of the success of settler colonialism."[35] Settlers in the Americas and slaves from Africa went together—as part of a *triangulated* strategy that supported the third component, the nationalism of the European metropoles. Barbara L. Solow writes: "Firm and enduring trade links between Europe and America were not forged without and until the introduction of slavery. . . . Colonial development was strongly associated with slavery."[36] In other words, the Americas were not developed in a dyadic relationship with their respective "mother" countries; there was a triangular formation that constituted the key to successful colonization. To view the history of the New World this way is to fully acknowledge the importance of slavery and of Africa and to redress the systematic erasure of the New World's debt to Africa.[37]

The need for labor in the Caribbean stimulated the first imports of African slaves—from Iberia at first, then, more efficiently, directly from Africa (T, 92). By 1530 most slaves were being brought directly from Africa to the New World. At first they worked alongside European indentured servants, but that form of servitude was abandoned—for reasons that are often falsely cited as "climactic" according to Eric Williams; the lovely climate

of the Caribbean islands is never as oppressive as South Carolina (nor even New Jersey) in the summer: African labor was simply "cheapest and best."[38] *Pace* Williams, racism played its part, at least as a rationale that emerged alongside of economic considerations and as an increasingly potent ideological support for the enslavement of Africans. With the rise of racism white slavery became unacceptable.[39] Somehow, agriculture paralleled race: on the French islands tobacco fell as sugar rose, and simultaneously, as if necessarily, indentured white labor was replaced by enslaved black labor.[40] Slavery became essential to the Atlantic system and to the establishment and functioning of the New World; David Eltis writes, "No one [between the middle of the sixteenth century and the late eighteenth century] . . . seriously contemplated an America without the enslavement of non-Europeans" (E, 27). From the moment it was decided that those non-Europeans would be Africans, the triangular Atlantic system was established, with Africa as an integral part of the relation between Europe and the Americas.

Eltis also shows how Africa itself narrowly escaped the "plantation complex"—the imposition of a large-scale, slave-powered agricultural system—thereby escaping European colonization for another three hundred years. The system that was invented in the Atlantic islands almost came ashore, but in the early sixteenth century its movement shifted toward the New World, paradoxically far from the supply of labor. As Eltis puts it, simply, "Europeans did not have the power to move into West Africa" (E, 146). They were unable to move beyond the coast: epidemiology played some part in this, but the strength of African states is at least as important. Africans controlled Africa and did not fall to European colonization until the late nineteenth century. Africans, as John Thornton puts it, "were active participants in the Atlantic world [and] controlled the nature of their interactions with Europe . . . including the slave trade."[41] They would sell captives to Europeans—thus setting up the pattern of the Atlantic trade—but they would not surrender control of their land for the establishment of European plantations. That would have to wait. (As we will see, the idea of setting up plantations in Africa was common among abolitionists in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth.) From this Eltis draws the interesting conclusion that "the slave trade was a symptom of African strength, not weakness" (E, 149).

VALUES

Underpinning the Atlantic triangle is the idea of value and the desire to increase value by transporting goods and human beings around the ocean. Arthur L. Stinchcombe explains the simple principles behind the triangular trade: "profits were due to the successful sailing of a ship with a valuable cargo from a place where the cargo was less valuable to a place where it was more valuable, to return with one that was more valuable yet."[42] The slave trade was predicated on the relatively low price put on human lives (for reasons that must be contemplated) in Africa, which enabled European traders to buy low, move across the Atlantic, and sell high—so high that the ships plying the Middle Passage from Africa to the Caribbean could not possibly carry enough Caribbean products home to equal the value of the captives they had sold; it took anywhere from two to four ships carrying sugar to equal that amount.[43] Cash payment would obviously have made this complicated system unnecessary, but for a variety of reasons cash was unavailable in the colonies (S, 52).[44] The system worked by barter and without any "common measure."[45] Especially in the early years in the islands, sugar (along with other commodities) *was* money: when the proprietor of a cabaret in Martinique was fined for selling brandy to slaves during a Sunday mass in 1689, his penalty was three hundred pounds of sugar.[46]

What is a person worth? Olaudah Equiano said that he was sold by one African merchant to another for 172 cowries.[47] What must it have been like to live in Africa at the height of the slave trade, when, as Manning points out, every encounter, particularly with a stranger, must have been haunted by the question, How much could you be sold for?[48] (The film *Adanggaman*, discussed in chapter 14, captures some of that feeling.) Questions of value—and of commercial desire for other humans—cannot be any more troubling than that. Le Sieur de La Courbe, a late-seventeenth-century trader and administrator in Senegal, reports that a Moor whom he met assessed the value of one horse as worth twenty-five captives or slaves; through the power of the Atlantic triangle, a captive sold into slavery was worth nine thousand pounds of sugar in the same time period—but only once that captive was transported across the Atlantic.[49] (And that of course is before said captive is put to work.) From one twenty-fifth of a horse—even in Senegal, where horses were highly valued[50]—to nine thousand pounds of sugar, the slave trade is full of bizarre calculations of the value of human life. The mon-

strosity of making such assessments in the first place is compounded by the prevalence of deception and cheating in all aspects of the slave trade.[51] But there can be no doubt that the force behind the rise of the slave trade was, in the early years, the general doubling (or more) of the value of a slave after crossing the Atlantic (T, 103).

Enticement for early French settlement in the Antilles came from Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, a missionary priest in the mid-seventeenth century, who deplored the sale of young white men "as slaves" (his characterization of indentured labor) on the islands, which he called a "detestable" and a "shameful commerce." Du Tertre, however, optimistically reported that a settler owning "two good Negroes" can live "well at ease and honorably" because the slaves can produce "1700 or 1800 pounds of tobacco, not counting the food they grow."[52]

For the European slave traders the transformation of value by displacement was almost a miracle. At the height of the trade the businessmen of Nantes could hardly believe their good fortune: "We have in our State no . . . commerce as precious as the commerce with Guinea [Africa], and one can hardly do enough to protect it. What other commerce could be compared to this one, which results in obtaining men in exchange for merchandise?"[53] Despite their "slip" in admitting that slaves are "men," the question is a good one.

Value was thus transformed, and space was defined by the desire to increase wealth—at the expense of lives. Patrick Manning has produced the most compelling—and chilling—explanation of the inner logic of the Atlantic triangle: in simplified form his thesis is that human lives were worth more, monetarily, in the New World than they were in Africa because environmental factors (the persistence of certain diseases) and technological factors (dependence on the hoe, which cannot produce as much as a plow can) lowered the productivity of workers in Africa. A person removed from Africa and transported to a quasi-industrial plantation in the Caribbean was able to produce far more value: "The logic of African supply of slaves depends . . . on the notion that slaves in the New World were more productive than free producers in Africa, with a margin large enough that New World slave owners could pay for the costs of transportation, mortality, and seasoning of their slaves" (*SAL*, 33). This imbalance of values kept the triangle turning, as Europeans continually sought to increase their wealth by turning, spinning, and sweeping around the Atlantic. The profit motive is

taken to be a rational mode of thought; its complicity with enslavement and genocide, as Paul Gilroy has pointed out, needs to be examined.[54] Abolition comes about only when an ex-slave appears to be more profitable to the system than a slave; only then is the triangle altered.

LOUIS XIII AND THE "ORIGIN" OF THE FRENCH SLAVE TRADE

The French entered an Atlantic slave trade that had been established and dominated by the Iberians. So it is fitting that it was a French captain (often mistaken for Portuguese) who may have been one of the first to make a triangular voyage around the Atlantic: Jean Alfonce Fontenau "de Saintonge" is reported to have sailed to the Grain Coast of Africa for pepper—and possibly for slaves as well—in the 1540s, crossing the Atlantic to "La France Antarctique" (a short-lived French foothold in Brazil).[55] But that foreshadowing is not the real origin of the French slave trade.

Nor, I think, is there much substance in the most-repeated tale of the origin of the French slave trade. It goes like this: in a decree of 1642 Louis XIII supposedly authorized the trade, expressing his wish that enslavement would save the souls of Africans. This narrative is widely accepted and often repeated when the press mentions the slave trade.[56] Its respectability is no doubt due to the fact that Montesquieu, the philosopher at the origin of French abolitionism, gave it credence and prominence in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). He wrote that Louis XIII "was extremely pained by the law making slaves of the Negroes in his colonies, but when it had been brought fully to his mind that this was the surest way to convert them, he consented to it."[57] And where did Montesquieu get this information about the king's state of mind? Not from any authentic document, nor from any authority on the reign of Louis XIII (who died in 1643, forty-six years before Montesquieu was born), but rather, his footnote indicates, from Jean-Baptiste Labat (1663–1738), a notorious, slave-trading, swashbuckling "pirate" priest of the Dominican order who was also a prolific (and plagiarizing) writer of travel accounts. Labat left his imprint all over the French Atlantic.[58] Labat, invoking what we will see to be the French "freedom principle," wrote in his *Nouveau voyage aux isles* in 1722:

> It is a very ancient law, that lands under the control of the kings of France render free all those who can reach them. That is why King Louis XIII, of glorious

> memory, as pious as he was wise, had all the trouble in the world [*toutes les peines du monde*] consenting to the first settlers of the Islands owning slaves, and only gave in to the insistent solicitations that were made to him to grant this permission because it was argued to him that this was an infallible way—and the only means available—to inspire the worship of the true God in the Africans, to remove them from idolatry, and to keep them until death in the Christian religion that would be instilled in them [*qu'on leur feroit embrasser*].[59]

Labat cites no source for this anecdote, and before him the trail disappears; no one cites any textual evidence preceding Labat, and the existence of the putative edict cannot be verified. Without any further shred of support, however, this story has been perpetuated in French historiography. Historians should have paid more attention to Joseph Morenas, an abolitionist who refuted the myth in 1828.[60] There is a glaring anomaly here: Louis XIII's authorization of the slave trade is often repeated in the historiography of the French slave trade, but works on the king make no mention of it. The supposed role of Louis the Just in originating the French branch of a murderous enterprise is not mentioned in modern biographies and studies of him.[61]

The anecdote itself is a highly significant artifact: it connects the image of a precise, written, original authorization of the French slave trade to an inflection of moral ambivalence. Two tendencies in French culture—the *esclavagiste* and the abolitionist—are thus reflected in this historiographical mystery. Slavery *is* salvation, yet it brings moral "pain" to those who enslave others. This story, apparently made up, perhaps based on oral history, maybe by the slave-driving priest Labat himself, is a microcosm of French attitudes toward slavery and the slave trade. Its purpose shifts from outright justification of the slave trade in Labat to an increasing emphasis, beginning in Montesquieu, on the morally dubious nature of enslavement itself.

The origins of the French slave trade were in all likelihood less clear and more detached from moral qualms than Labat's story would have us believe. What Louis XIII authorized in his edict of March 1642 was the colonization of the Antilles.[62] The last decade of the reign of Louis XIII began to establish the French Atlantic triangle, and various decrees by the king regulated this process. Richelieu granted a monopoly on the Senegal trade to a group from Dieppe and Rouen in 1633; there were slaves on Saint-Christophe as early as 1626; a French slave trade began to supply that island in 1633.[63] Piecemeal authorizations for the importation of slaves from Africa were issued over the next several decades. Then, in 1664, Colbert established the

Compagnie des Indes Occidentales, designed to conduct a triangular trade that included the transportation of enslaved Africans to the Antilles.[64] This was the beginning of the real French slave trade, within a scheme of "exclusive" mercantilism that we will examine presently.

The French took possession of Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1635, of Guyane (definitively) in 1663, and of Saint-Domingue (officially) in 1697. Adopting the plantation system from the Iberians, and learning the art of refining sugar from Dutch-Jewish settlers who had been exiled from Brazil, the French established a slave society very quickly.[65] Du Tertre's descriptions and illustrations of 1667 already resemble (and in some ways surpass) what the *Encyclopédie* will depict one hundred years later (see figure 2).[66] Across the Atlantic France established itself in Senegal at Saint-Louis in 1659 and took Gorée Island in 1677. With these outposts scattered around the Atlantic, the French triangle was prepared. Already in the 1630s the first *lettres patentes* permitted trade in Africa with a direct connection to the Antilles—undoubtedly including slaves.[67]

If any moral scruples impaired the French entry into the trade—for example, those that made for a ban on the sale of slaves in Bordeaux in the 1570s—by the time labor was called for by Caribbean planters in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, everything moral and material was in place.[68] There could not have been great obstacles, since forms of slavery (serfdom and galley slavery, for example), still existed in France itself. The Church not only did not object but, in the person of Bossuet, encouraged slavery.[69]

But the moral and legal context in France was complex. Conditions of slavery and servitude were offset by what Sue Peabody calls the Freedom Principle: the notion, supported by a decree of Louis X in 1315, that "France" signifies freedom and that any slave setting foot on what we now call the hexagon should be freed. There was in fact a tradition of freeing slaves, and it remained influential, if often undercut, during the time of the Atlantic slave trade.[70] That principle made France's negotiation of the slave trade slightly more complicated, posing ethical and legal hurdles along the way. Which was the "real" France—the slave trader or the liberator? That debate animates much of the literature that will be studied in this book. In fact France would often seek to have it both ways, by asserting that enslavement saved (freed) the *soul* of the slave: that is what Labat's tale of Louis XIII manages to convey in a few words. Throughout colonial and postcolo-

2 "Sugar Mill." From Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François* (Paris: Thomas Iolly, 1667), 1:122. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

nial history France will often be torn between its magnanimous, liberal impulses (religious at first, then humanitarian) and its desire to dominate and profit.[71]

Indentured servitude of Europeans was a step on the way toward race-based slavery. The French experimented seriously with *engagés à temps* in the New World, in what Crété calls a "temporary slavery" that generally lasted three years. Some were masons, coopers, tailors, or even surgeons; many were unskilled laborers working in tobacco fields, sometimes along with African slaves. *Engagés* could be bought and sold during the time of their contract, and by some accounts there was a veritable *traite des blancs*, complete with *marronnage* and rewards for recapture.[72] At the end of their indenture the laborers were paid in tobacco or sugar, and, most important, they were free to either stay or go home to France. The rise of sugar in the islands brought with it a demand for labor that seemed only possible to meet by the importation of African slaves. Sugar required a massive supply of labor that could not be provided by meager numbers of workers who would be set free soon after acquiring the expertise that sugar cultivation required. Sugar "needed" slaves, and sugar consumed slaves.

THE EXCLUSIVE TRIANGLE

> Direct trade from our Colonies to the coasts of Africa is prohibited for the sole purpose of reserving the advantages of that trade to the commerce of the Kingdom.
>
> "Lettre du Ministre à M. de Reynaud" (1784)

By 1656 the aboriginal people of Guadeloupe were eradicated and three thousand enslaved Africans worked on the island, in the presence of twelve thousand French people, some of whom were indentured laborers. In 1664 Colbert created the Compagnie des Indes with a short-lived monopoly on the trade bringing slaves to the New World; in 1670 he exempted the slave trade from tariffs to stimulate the importation of labor to the island. In 1716 the trade in "Negroes, gold powder, and all other merchandise that they can draw from the Coasts of Africa" was opened to all traders, provided that they operated out of Rouen, La Rochelle, Bordeaux, or Nantes; later, Le Havre would replace Rouen. The acts of that year constitute a veritable "code of the triangular trade."[73] One historian dates the emergence of the French Atlantic to "the watershed year of 1713," when the War of Spanish Succession ended and colonial investment was relaunched.[74]

Between 1640 and 1700 the French took 75,000 slaves into their colonies; from 1700 to 1760, 388,000. The prodigious rise of Saint-Domingue began in the 1730s, marked by huge importations of slaves, producing the richest colony on Earth. French slave exports from Africa peaked in the years leading up to the Revolution, with an average of twenty-seven thousand slaves transported per year between 1781 and 1790. At the end of the eighteenth century the nations of Europe and the United States were collectively forcing eighty thousand captives per year on the Middle Passage; the total for the whole century was more than six million.[75] During the entire period of the slave trade, the French exported 1.1 million Africans (slightly more than one million of which were traded in the eighteenth century alone) in 3,649 recorded voyages.[76] Extrapolating from all available data, David Geggus concludes that "French carriers must have been responsible for about one-eighth of the total [Atlantic] traffic."[77] The three French Caribbean island colonies ranked third as an importer of slaves to the New World, taking in 17 percent of the total—the same number as was taken in by all of Spanish America.[78] For perspective one should take onboard this fact, as stated by Michel-Rolph Trouillot: "Martinique, a tiny territory less than one-fourth

the size of Long Island, imported more slaves than all the U.S. states combined" (excluding Louisiana).[79]

The grand scheme of the triangle was perfection itself; as shown by maps of the winds sweeping across the Atlantic, they trace the triangular trade.[80] When the Chevalier de Boufflers, governor of Senegal, tried to return directly to France in 1786 (bringing with him the "little captive" Ourika as a gift for his aunt and uncle), he found the winds "contrary," and some onboard suggested that they just go to America, "where the wind would lead us directly," and from there to France. The best heading the ship could get pointed them toward Newfoundland; they finally put in at the Azores, halfway across the Atlantic, before they were able (barely) to make a course for La Rochelle.[81] They might as well have gone to the Antilles and followed the triangle. Early in his correspondence, in fact, the governor complained that his letters to his mistress could only get to France via Saint-Domingue (129).[82] The Antilles were a "stopover" on the trip from Africa back to France.[83]

The winds may thus have encouraged the logic and economics of the triangle; the French state did the rest. For a variety of reasons, then, the triangle was set up as a one-way pattern.[84] Slave traders sailed out of French ports, went to Africa, then to the Caribbean, then home; there was little variation from that itinerary. This was especially true in the classical period of the trade, the eighteenth century. Few departures were recorded (and none that have left a narrative trace that I have found) from the French Caribbean bound for Africa.[85] That route was forbidden and almost totally closed off. Edouard Glissant writes in *Le Quatrième siècle* of that experience, from the point of view of those who had been enslaved: "They came on the ocean, and when they saw the new land, there was no hope; they were not permitted to go back [*de revenir en arrière*]."[86]

The simplicity of the triangular system was just as the Abbé Raynal puts it in the title to book 11 of his *Histoire des deux Indes*: "Europeans go to Africa to buy farm laborers [*cultivateurs*] for the West Indies."[87] Yet within that formula and within the Atlantic system itself, there was a fundamental irony of huge proportions. The triangle brought the workers to the work; only the products and profits returned home. The massive and paradoxical inefficiency of a system that moves labor across an entire ocean under hideous conditions—to cultivate crops that they might grow back in Africa—is a question that will occur to various observers over the centuries and a question to which I will return in my chapter on Baron Roger. The perceived

need to displace Africans in order to make the Americas productive created the Atlantic as we know it.

There were many exceptions to the classic triangular itinerary, and a healthy commerce *en droiture* (direct trade between Europe and the Caribbean) was necessary to supply the islands and bring home the excess value created by the import of slaves (that is, the two or three extra shiploads required to make up the value of one load of slaves).[88] The triangular trade and the commerce *en droiture* were inseparable parts of the same Atlantic economy. Colbert worked to ensure the rigidity of the triangle: his doctrine of the *Exclusif* did not allow trade that deviated from the lines of the French Atlantic triangle; trade with other empires—possibly creating webs of interwoven triangles—was not permitted (which doesn't mean it did not happen). The *Exclusif* had begun as a form of monopoly granted to French companies against each other but in 1674 assumed its classic form: the exclusion of non-French traders from the French Atlantic triangle. With the end of the monopoly companies, commerce was opened to all Frenchmen, while at the same time "foreign" trade (that is, outside the bounds of the French Atlantic triangle) was banned. Foreign ships were not to enter French colonial ports, and French colonial products were not to be shipped anywhere but to France. As Montesquieu described the *Exclusif* in *The Spirit of the Laws*, "the metropole alone may trade [*négocier*] with the colonies."[89] Enforcement—a nearly impossible task—may have been most rigorous from 1703 to 1715.[90] For Colbert the colonies were children; they should do what they were told; they did not even need (and did not have) money (T, 189). The mercantilist laws of the *Exclusif* demanded that it be so: the colonies were subject to "the most austere prohibitions favoring the metropole."[91] By this system of supports and encouragements, taxes and tax breaks, France institutionalized the triangle. The fall of state monopoly companies like the Compagnie des Indes and the rise of private enterprise in the slave trade (still regulated by the state) did not alter the basic functions of the triangle: trade goods still went to Africa, captives were transported to the islands, and colonial products returned to France. Social networks reinforced the triangle: by the late eighteenth century, writes Laurent Dubois, "many merchant houses in France's major port towns . . . owned plantations [and therefore slaves] in Saint-Domingue" and the other French islands; the Caribbean became "the main destination for Frenchmen seeking their fortunes in the Americas" after the loss of Canada.[92] The *Exclusif*, part real monopoly, part "program," and part "ideal,"[93] remained a force throughout

most of the eighteenth century, until the American Revolution gave France a new reason to trade with North America. From that point on, the *Exclusif* lost its force, and the triangle was consequently altered—although it was substantially revived in its traditional form during the Restoration, between 1814 and 1830. In the nineteenth century some (now illegal) French slave traders set out from the Antilles bound for Africa, thus engaging in bilateral trade, revolutionizing the pattern that had been in place.[94]

It is important to the overall thrust of this book to note the lingering effects of the *Exclusif*. French Guyanese legislator Christiane Taubira makes this point eloquently: "We of France 'overseas' know what it is to run up against the vestiges of the colonial *Exclusif*, which link the former colonies to their former metropoles, from South to North, without facilitating contacts with neighboring countries, without the possibility of regional contacts. We know why migratory patterns follow the paths of languages and old dominations. We know the cost of trying to transgress the ban on industrialization formulated by Colbert ('not one nail should come out of the colonies')."[95]

Beginning in 1715, a "sugar revolution" took place in the Antilles: sugar production in Martinique quadrupled between 1717 and 1753, and the number of slaves increased by the same factor, from 14,500 to 65,000. Saint-Domingue took the lead in importing slaves and producing sugar in the mid-eighteenth century, with an estimated slave population of five hundred thousand or six hundred thousand in 1789, feeding six hundred sugar mills (C, 189). The direct relation between the number of slaves and the production of sugar has been well demonstrated.[96] Sidney Mintz's analysis of the triangle reflects mostly on Britain, where sugar had the most profound impact on diet, but the French islands in fact began to rival the British islands in the 1720s in sugar production and took the lead in 1767.[97]

As Mintz shows in *Sweetness and Power*, there was (and is, as everyone knows) a clear synergy of taste among the leading alimentary *denrées coloniales* (colonial products): sugar, coffee, chocolate, and tea: sugar is needed to sweeten the bitter tropical liquids, and all are stimulants, likely to produce cravings—a desire for more (see also T, 189–90). Sugar was needed or at least wanted "as work schedules were quickening . . . and as the factory system was taking shape and spreading" (in other words, as literal fuel for the labor of the industrial revolution).[98] In the upper echelons of society colonial products were not only found to be delicious and stimulating; they also connoted imperial power. Blackburn points out the symbolic value at

Versailles of colonial accessories and elaborate confections made of sugar. The rising craving for sweetness and stimulation in Europe — in all the leading colonial nations and at several levels of society — played a large role in the enslavement and forced migration of Africans, through the workings of the Atlantic triangle. As an early French abolitionist put it, with scathing irony: "We are wrong, but we need sugar."[99] Some sugar reached Africa: the fruit of the labor of Africans (who could not themselves return to Africa) returned to complete the triangular circuit.[100]

Other commodities drove the triangular trade as well, perhaps none as "perfectly" as cotton. As one of the principal goods traded for slaves in Africa, cotton cloths, initially imported from India, then manufactured in Europe (*les indiennes*, as they were and are called in France), paid for slaves, who would go to the colonies to produce raw cotton, which would go to Europe to make more cloth.[101]

The triangle was driven partly by cravings in Europe — for sweetness and the energy of caffeine but also more generally for wealth; and it was enabled by the cooperation of African elites, who, also motivated by a desire for enrichment or in order to punish criminals or enemies, sold their captives — thereby accounting for two points of the triangle. The whole scheme, however, depended on the Caribbean, and the New World more generally, as a place of both production and destruction. For the eighteenth century the figures on the productivity and thus the value of the Antilles to France are powerful. Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Saint-Domingue — three relatively small territories, with a combined area roughly equivalent to Massachusetts and Delaware together, and almost exactly the size of Normandy in France — produced value radically out of proportion to their size, all of it driven by slave labor and the continued operation of the slave trade. On the eve of the Revolution France's islands led the world in the production of sugar. Martinique became a large exporter of coffee — the second Antillean *denrée* — in the 1730s. Guadeloupe, under British control from 1759 to 1763, became the most productive of the British islands (only to go back to the French in 1763) (C, 7, 29, 190, 191). Saint-Domingue (which doubled its production between 1783 and 1789) alone accounted for two-thirds of France's overseas trade and was "the most profitable colony the world had ever known." C. L. R. James sees in that assertion one support for his controversial theory that "slavery and the slave trade were the economic basis of the French Revolution."[102] Thanks to the *Exclusif* and to *dirigisme* in

general, all of this productivity was, in principle, aimed at the metropole alone.

Most dramatically, the real value of the Antilles to France was demonstrated by the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years' War in 1763: France gave up Senegal—its oldest and most significant foothold south of the Sahara (while retaining Gorée Island) and its part of Canada in order to regain Martinique and Guadeloupe. Voltaire famously quipped about this treaty: "I am like the public. I love peace much more than I love Canada, and I think that France can be happy without Quebec."[103] His reaction contains an implicit preference for one mode of colonization—the Caribbean version, based on slavery—over the Canadian version, based on settlement and trade (in the sense of exchange more than extraction) between free peoples. The twenty-five-year period from the Treaty of Paris to the French Revolution was the apogee of the triangular, slave-based economy: the slave trade churned, the plantations worked slaves to death, and the colonial products of their labor brought heaps of wealth to the planters and the slave traders.[104]

ON THE ISLANDS

So the hunger and greed of the metropole spurred the planters of the Antilles, who in turn spurred their slaves. The productivity of the islands was entirely conditioned on slavery and the continuation of the slave trade. The trade was necessary not only for the expansion of industrial agriculture but simply for its maintenance, because slavery killed slaves before, during, and after the Middle Passage. Demographics show that the destruction of human lives during the crossing and on the plantations of the Caribbean was a significant stimulus to the slave trade. Death created demand within the system and kept the triangle turning. It was found to be cheaper to keep importing slaves from Africa—in spite of the expense and danger of the African trade—than to raise slave children to working age; slaves were expendable.[105] Du Tertre reported from the islands simply: "An infinite number of Negroes die."[106] A century later, Raynal claimed that the 140,000 or 150,000 slaves present in the European colonies of the New World were the "unfortunate leftovers" of eight or nine million brought over from Africa.[107] The plantation system, as Robin Blackburn puts it, broke with "any geographical constraint" and displayed an "unquenchable thirst for slave labour and

slave lives."[108] A dreadful arithmetic fills discussions of the slave trade, all of it uncertain yet certainly appalling. No one knows how many lives were lost in Africa in the violent process of taking captives for the slave trade; in 1915 W. E. B. Du Bois said that five Africans died for every one taken captive; Patrick Manning suggests it was five million who died in capture operations between 1700 and 1850.[109] Estimates of mortality during the Middle Passage generally vary between 10 and 20 percent and may average around 13 percent, but of course there were cases of a 100 percent death rate.[110] Robert Stein says that 150,000 captives died in French ships "either along the [African] coast or while crossing the Atlantic" in the eighteenth century (S, 99). French seaman Robert Durand recorded the deaths of captives on his ship, *Le Diligent*, with a skull (see figure 3), those of French crew members with a cross. Using historians' current best estimates, there is a chilling shortfall between the number of Africans put on ships and those who arrived in the New World: roughly 1.5 million died on the Atlantic crossing.[111]

French planters of the Antilles were known internationally as efficient taskmasters, yielding 25 percent more sugar per acre than their Jamaican counterparts (WC, 56). The *Code Noir* of 1685 attempted to regulate the entire institution of slavery as part of an effort by the central state to gain greater control over the slaveholding colonies. The order of prescriptions in the Code is significant: in article 1 Jews are expulsed from the colonies; in article 2 it is ordered that all slaves be baptized and instructed as Roman Catholics; in article 3 the exercise of all other religions is banned.[112] This was, after all, the year of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The Code provided for certain minimal rights of slaves: they could not be married against their will (article 11); if baptized, they were to be buried in consecrated ground (article 14); each slave was entitled to a prescribed minimum of food (article 22) and to two sets of clothing per year (article 25). But owners were barely punished for violating slaves' meager entitlements, while actual atrocities were prescribed by the Code against slaves who attempted escape or committed other offenses: for maroons, branding with a fleur-de-lis, cutting the hamstring, or, after the third escape, death. These prescriptions were precise and legal, making "rational" what Du Tertre had twenty years earlier deplored as a system of "arbitrary punishments . . . at the discretion of [the] Masters."[113] Thus the Code enlisted rationality in the practice of violence. Louis Sala-Molins describes the Code as a spectacular "theoretical performance" allowing France to pronounce simulta-

3 Skull indicating death of a captive. Robert Durand, *Journal de bord d'un négrier* (1731), 93. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

neously "slavery" and "law," "enslavement" and "code"—to have it both ways; the Code is one of the most spectacular instances of what Paul Gilroy calls "the complicity of rationality and ethnocidal terror."[114] Perhaps more important than anything, the Code's article 44 declared slaves to be *meubles* (possessions, "furniture," as it were) that could be treated as "sums of money" (*deniers*) and "other movable things" (article 45). Through these legal mechanisms slaves were subjected to the control of the French state. As Joseph Roach puts it, the Code set up "the partial incorporation of hundreds of thousands and eventually millions of Africans into the body politic of the Ancien Régime and its sucessors."[115] But the body metaphor is not completely successful here, because these enslaved, black members of the French body politic—perhaps one or two individuals for every ten thousand in the years leading up to the Revolution[116]—were kept largely out of sight (four thousand miles away) and out of mind. This brings us to an important point about the Code Noir, raised by Cilas Kemedjio: where did the slaves in this code come from? The Code "left the slave trade itself in the shadows."[117] The effects of the Code Noir have endured.[118]

The general context of cruelty in which the Code intervened can be discerned from an upbeat passage in Froger's relation of his time in Martinique during his triangular voyage:

> I knew a planter of Martinique, who out of some kind of compassion was unable to order the leg cut off one of his Slaves, who had already deserted four or five times. So as to not risk losing him entirely, he [the planter] devised to rig the Slave up with a chain strung along his back between his neck and his foot, as shown in the Figure [see figure 4]. His nerves so shortened in this posture that after two or three years it was impossible for this Slave to use his leg. Thus with-

4 "Invention d'un François de la Martinique" [Invention of a Frenchman of Martinique]. From Le Sieur Froger, *Relation du voyage de Mr. De Gennes* (1698), 150. Detail. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

> out risking the life of this wretch, and *without causing him any pain* [*sans lui faire aucun mal*], the means of fleeing were taken away from him.[119]

Conditions were anything but conducive to human reproduction. In 1765 there were two hundred thousand slaves in Saint-Domingue, and "it was generally assumed that fifteen thousand slaves had to be introduced every year just to maintain the labor force at the right level"; imports to Saint-Domingue in fact rose to forty thousand per year (T, 277, 285). The traffic was so intense, and the birthrate among slaves was so low, that in 1750, two-thirds of all the slaves in Saint-Domingue had been born in Africa.[120] Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* speaks of a direct relation between cruelty in the Caribbean and the continuation of the slave trade: Barbados "requires 1,000 negroes annually to keep up the original stock, which is only 80,000" (OE, 79).

Looking at the entire history of the Atlantic slave trade, we see that certain statistics, as organized by Patrick Manning, reveal a horrific truth: ten million Africans were brought to the New World by 1820, while only two million Europeans came (thus five times more blacks than whites); yet in 1820 there were twelve million whites in the New World and half that

number of blacks (*SAL*, 37). In 1600 Africa held 30 percent of the combined population of the New World, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa; two hundred years later that share had fallen to 20 percent (*SAL*, 171). Death drove the slave trade and kept it going.

The Atlantic slave trade continued its dreadful traffic—and passed as the "normal" scheme of things (T, 14)—until petering out in the nineteenth century, many decades after enlightened abolitionists began their work. The British and the United States banned the slave trade in 1807, and France did so partially in the period of the Bourbon Restoration, but interdiction—along with the industrial revolution, which lowered the price of the *mise hors* (T, 677)—only increased the profitability of the triangle. French slave-trading voyages doubled in 1819, and there may have been five hundred French slave-trading voyages between 1818 and 1831 (T, 621, 625).[121] This late, illegal trade by the French was the object of considerable "romance" in literature, as we will see: numerous accounts and fictions emphasized the "adventures" of French slave traders dodging British warships. This period of illegal trade during the Restoration will in fact be the central focus of both French and Francophone writers, as much of this study will show. The French slave trade only faded away after three different laws were passed, the last one with genuine enforcement, in 1831. Still, with slavery a legal institution in the French islands until 1848, some trade persisted. By the most recent count, 11,062,000 Africans were transported across the Atlantic as slaves, about 1,456,400 by the French, but these cold and rough numbers can hardly begin to establish an understanding of what happened (E, 42).[122]

INTERLOPING

My attention thus far has been devoted almost exclusively to the centripetal forces of the French Atlantic triangle. The illegal, clandestine, potentially revolutionary activities of those who worked outside the *Exclusif* are, by definition, harder to find in the written record. Historians have naturally tended to analyze what is documented more than what is undocumented. And, by definition, no one can say what proportion of the trade was conducted clandestinely outside the official paths. Was there in the French Atlantic economy anything like the remarkable "Many-Headed Hydra" described by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in their book of that name? Or is French historiography (to borrow their terms) a "captive of the nation-

state"—thereby suggesting that the *Exclusif* and the triangle are figments of a "largely unquestioned framework of analysis"?[123]

This intriguing possibility is somewhat vitiated from the start when applied to the French Atlantic triangle for the simple reason that the three islands that dominated this economy were among the most accessible and best-controlled of France's overseas territories. Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint-Domingue "offered far better opportunities for regular contact and for state influence than Canada and especially Louisiana."[124]

Even so, enforcement of the *Exclusif* was irregular and often corrupted; there were constant violations by regular traders as well as by pirates and freebooters. *Interlope* is the term used to describe "a vast and complex system of illegal exchanges" in the Caribbean and more generally within the New World (but *not*, significantly, with Africa).[125] The *interlope* was a logical "corollary" of the strictness of the *Exclusif*.[126] Illegal trade rose and fell depending on the ability of the French state to control both the seas and its own colonies. During the American War of Independence patterns were altered and disturbed, but from 1783 to 1792 the triangle regained strength: more than 1,100 French ships took 370,000 captives across the Atlantic, almost all to Saint-Domingue (C, 245).

But interloping trade among white people is only one part of the many different types of forces that resisted the control of the *Exclusif*. The slaves themselves were of course not merely passive recipients of the forces that we have seen here; they actively resisted, engaging in uncountable forms of *marronnage* (escape) as well as numerous open revolts. The ultimate form of rebellion was the Haitian Revolution, which irrevocably altered the French Atlantic triangle and caused its most basic assumptions to be rethought. But more subtle, less famous acts of resistance took place earlier and elsewhere. Those slaves who were reported to have fled Guadeloupe and Martinique for Puerto Rico and Trinidad in the mid-eighteenth century revealed "leaks" in the supposedly watertight system of the French slave trade and slave-labor economy.[127] Their ability to island-hop and cross the boundaries of the French, Spanish, and British empires raises important questions about official and antiofficial activity. So the question of resistance to the triangle is not, in this study, to be understood simply as a matter of shipping and trading either inside or outside of certain lines. Even if trade on the ground and on the seas had been absolutely limited to the triangle, some would have been able to *think* outside its lines.

My survey thus far has already encountered a number of epistemological

and historical ambiguities. Before we go any further in establishing a context for the interpretation of literature and film about the French slave trade, I want to pause for a moment to consider *how* we know what we know (and do not know) about this entire subject.

SILENCES, LITERACIES, AND ABSENT NARRATIVES (WHY IS THERE NO FRANCOPHONE EQUIANO?)

The European side of this encounter is well documented by certain of the traders themselves (Jean Barbot, John Hawkins, Willem Bosman, and Pruneau de Pommegorge are often cited) and by observers such as the priests Jean-Baptiste Labat (who said he never left his ship on the African coast) and the Abbé Demanet (famous for his slave trading and his libertinism). Later, antislavery writings will document the horrors of the trade. In the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth abolitionist writings include both fictive and testimonial reflections on the trade — many of which will be discussed in this study. But the African side of the larger question — what might have been going on in the mind of African elites as they sold their captives, and the lived experience of those who were taken and enslaved — is more elusive and largely lost. Sources are "extremely rare" but "not inexistent."[128] Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789) is the most frequently cited account of the Middle Passage and of slavery in the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century. Recent doubts about its authenticity, related to questions about Equiano's birthplace, compound the problem of silence considerably; the *Narrative* must now be read with caution and with awareness that at least some of the text may result from fabrication, embellishment, or indirect reporting taken from oral or written sources (all of which is far from a complete discrediting of the narrative).[129] As I will suggest in chapter 10, the possible fictivity of Equiano's narrative brings it into the same analytical field as some more obviously fictional texts, like the Baron Roger's *Kelédor*; it also narrows the gap between the discourse of the Anglo-American Atlantic, influenced by slave narratives, and that of the French Atlantic, without those texts as such.[130]

Another "interesting narrative," the *Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua* (1854) is not as well known; "written and revised from [Baquaqua's] own words" by Samuel Moore, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist, the text zigzags between third-person biography and first-person autobiography, lead-

ing its editors to ask, rightly, "Whose voice are we in fact hearing?"[131] The African point of view on the slave trade and direct eyewitness accounts of the Middle Passage do not come without a price of refraction and ambiguity.[132]

Among other sources of testimony about the slave trade from the slaves' perspective are those gathered in Philip Curtin's volume *Africa Remembered*. But there are few direct *African* representations and accounts of the sale of slaves *by Africans*—and almost nothing told from the point of view of an African Atlantic slave trader. Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, another rare source, states, "I must own, to the shame of my own countrymen, that I was first kid-napped and betrayed by some of my own complexion, who were the first cause of my exile and slavery."[133]

Cugoano, Equiano, and Baquaqua all tell how they were captured and sold, but their African captors remain silent. There are very few representations of the African slave traders' point of view and thus little chance for gaining insight into their motivations. There are small exceptions, in oral history, some reportedly recorded on tape in Nigeria (D, 13); a king of Asante speaks of his motivations in a journal by Joseph Dupuis published in 1824.[134] King Agaja of Dahomey sent a letter to King George I of England in 1726 that shed light on his motivations for trading in slaves: as Robert Harms describes it, Agaja needed cowry shells, gunpowder, and cloth—"the cowry shells for the common people, like the silk cloth for the royal wives and the gunpowder for the army, could be obtained only through the slave trade."[135] (Agaja is discussed in Maryse Condé's novel *Hérémakhonon* and in the film *Middle Passage*.)

In the English-speaking world, and especially in the United States, the problem of silence is significantly offset by testimonies and narratives, beginning with Equiano's. But in French the problem is far more serious, for *there are no real slave narratives in French*—not as we know them in the Anglophone Atlantic, not that have yet been discovered. That absence, for now at least, haunts any inquiry into the history of slavery. The slave narratives that emerged in the United States were in fact the exception; only one narrative, from Cuba, written by a slave during the time of slavery, came out of the entire Caribbean.[136] (Toussaint Louverture was "the first of the black memorialists" in French, but his memoirs are concerned with his actions as a general; they contain no recollections of Toussaint's life as a slave, so they are not a slave narrative as such.)[137] When abolitionists in France began their

work and wanted the words of slaves to support their arguments, they either made them up—as is perhaps the case of Lecointe-Marsillac's *Le More-Lack* (1789)—or got them from English.[138] Thus the Abbé Prévost, in what Roger Mercier calls one of the "first traces of compassion" for African slaves, published in *Le Pour et le contre* the translation from English of a speech by Jamaican rebel slave Moses bom Saam—a text that was an early benchmark in the emergence of the "noble Negro."[139] Significantly, Prévost prefaces the text with elaborate skepticism, as an example of a work "of dubious authority," but the power of the speech comes through nonetheless.[140] The voice of the revolted slave thus emerges from a limbo between fiction and authenticity, thus precisely as *literature*.

With regard to the situation in French, Louis Sala-Molins writes, "We have at our disposal not a single written testimony on the reality of slavery coming from a slave."[141] This is *almost* literally true. The slave plantations of the Caribbean were anything but writerly places, and although the Code Noir mandated that slaves be instructed in religion, hardly any education happened, slave literacy was scarce, and no slave narratives were apparently written.[142] It seems clear that under the regime of slavery from the time of the Code Noir until abolition, "instruction" was seen as instruction in religion only, as catechism; that it was *oral*, with no attempt to impart literacy; and that very little of it took place.[143] Instruction required both free time for the slaves and their ability to assemble; it was therefore perceived as a risk of insurrection. Fénelon, the governor of Martinique in 1764, wrote, "Education . . . is a duty for the principles of holy religion, but wise policy [*la saine politique*] and human considerations are against it. . . . *The safety of the Whites demands that we keep the Negroes in the profoundest ignorance*."[144] Exceptional schools that gave any instruction to slaves were clearly seen as dangerous in an order issued in Martinique at the time of the Revolution: "It would therefore be a very dangerous imprudence to continue to tolerate schools for Negroes and people of color in this colony."[145] This phrasing of course suggests that in fact some slaves were receiving instruction, and this important point—the exceptional instances of slave literacy in the French islands—is addressed in a remarkable book by Haitian historian Jean Fouchard, *Les Marrons du syllabaire* (1953).[146]

Fouchard provides a wealth of information both on the interdiction of literacy in the French islands and on "miraculous" escapes into literacy on the part of slaves—the maroons of the title. The spelling book (*syllabaire*)

was forbidden to slaves (63, 67, 72)—and we need look no further for an explanation of the absence of slave narratives. But this does not mean that there was no literacy among slaves. Among the frequent and numerous notices of runaway slaves published in newspapers were some warning that the slave in question was literate and might be bearing a false pass that he or she had written. As Fouchard makes clear, we simply do not know how these slaves acquired the ability to read or write—but they did manage, and that is remarkable.[147] To Fouchard's research I can add one other sign of the nearly paranoid controls on literacy exercised by the slaveholding class of Saint-Domingue, this notice published in the daily newspaper *La Gazette du jour* (November 15, 1790): "N.B. Our honorable Subscribers are kindly asked to provide their Negro servant with a card, showing their name, when they send them to pick up the *Gazette du Jour*. The newspaper will be delivered only to those bearing such cards or to the Subscribers themselves." A newspaper in the hands of a slave was obviously a dangerous thing. But in all that Fouchard offers in his book, nothing is as startling as his observation that the slave's first contact with literacy, in many cases, was when he or she was *branded*; the initials of the buyer were the first spelling book (97).

Fouchard also reproduces a few exceptional documents that should be kept in mind: letters from slaves in Saint-Domingue, perhaps corrected by scribes, but in all probability authentic. In 1792 a slave named Polisson or Lapierre wrote to his master: "I implore your sympathy to have my master give me my freedom."[148] The controls on literacy and the suppression of the slave's rise to and through literacy take on a new weight when one sees the fears of the authorities realized, for example, in a letter from the slave leader Casimir to the governor of Martinique in August 1789. Casimir eloquently declared that the "entire Nation of black slaves, united" in one "cry," desired only independence and freedom.[149] This is the *cri* that Césaire will have to reinvent in his *Cahier*. It was in Haiti, not Martinique, Césaire tells us in the *Cahier*, that "Negritude stood up for the first time," but here, in his own Martinique in 1789, we see that cry in literate form and something beyond what Césaire himself would stand up for: independence.

Still, these letters, as compelling and moving as they are, cannot compete with the comprehensive value of the slave narratives published in the United States in the nineteenth century. The letters interrupt but do not overcome the "silence" or, to put it more precisely, the deficit of direct testimony in written form. What would African American history and historiography be without the testimonies of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Harriet

Jacobs, or the dozens of narratives of former slaves? That is the condition of the African diaspora in the French Atlantic.

The problem of silences about the slave trade touches all points of the triangle and constitutes a veritable complex. The slave-trading ports of Europe (Liverpool excepted) have shown little inclination to acknowledge this part of their past: the elites of the slave-trading cities prefer to keep their "little green boxes" of family secrets secret; in this milieu the slave trade simply "must not be discussed publicly."[150] Renault and Daget compare the "muteness" of these families in France to that of Africans who guard oral traditions bearing on the slave trade.[151] There are no fitting memorials in the former slave-trading cities of Europe (except Liverpool) to the millions deported from Africa for the profit of the metropole. Until the appearance of the Martinican Guy Deslauriers's *Middle Passage* (from a script written by Patrick Chamoiseau) in 2001, no French film had really dealt with the Atlantic slave trade, although, for better or for worse, there are several *bandes dessinées*.[152] Most important for our purposes here, there is no French *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, no singularly influential literary work from which abolitionism gathered strength in its own times and which can serve as a compelling *aide-mémoire* now.[153]

The Committee for the Memory of Slavery chaired by Maryse Condé with a mandate to "repair" the forgetting of slavery and the slave trade, defined the problem: "Rare are the French people who know that, for nearly four centuries, their country was a great enslaving power [*une grande puissance esclavagiste*]."[154] In a recent novel Edouard Glissant evokes the condition that underpins France's forgetfulness: the absence of slaves on French soil, a fact of the triangular trade. "The former slave-trading cities of Europe," Glissant writes, "did not know the crowds of piled-up and festering slaves, nor the shouting markets nor the shitholes, the din and the public whippings, which haunt the atmosphere of the port cities of the Americas, of the Caribbean or of Brazil. . . . We look in vain for the stigmata of the Trade: the odor has not remained in the air; there was never any odor; no noise left a trace." What remains behind in Nantes and Bordeaux are yachts: "the exaltation of hot climates, . . . so many pure Atlantic pleasures."[155]

The fate of a monument project in Nantes is instructive. On April 25, 1998, a statue commemorating the abolition of slavery 150 years earlier was dedicated on the Quai de la Fosse in Nantes—the very site of outfitting

and embarkation for hundreds of slave-trading expeditions. Six days later the statue was vandalized; a photograph of the statue stood on the empty pedestal years later, while funds were being raised for a new statue.[156] The government-sponsored organization Maison d'Outre-Mer and the association Les Anneaux de la mémoire (which sponsored an important exhibition in 1992) are working in Nantes toward the creation of a new monument.[157]

As Serge Daget said, the real monuments to this crime against humanity are the Sahara Desert, the Atlantic and Indian oceans themselves.[158] For a long time the slave trade was practically a "taboo" subject among French historians (C, 8). That has changed somewhat in recent years, since the commemorations of abolition in 1998 and the passing of a law that declared slavery and the slave trade to be crimes against humanity in 2001.[159] In April 2005 the French Committee for the Memory of Slavery, chaired by Maryse Condé, presented a report calling on the Republic to "contemplate this shameful page of its history" and proposing an array of measures aimed at "historical reparation." The committee called for the establishment of May 10 as an annual day of commemoration.[160] Still, the weight of centuries and decades of silence blocks memory, which itself should not be fetishized as a panacea for the crimes of history. As I will argue later, justice that needs to be done in the present should not be filibustered by arguments about injustice in the past; if some eighteenth-century Africans profited from the slave trade, it does not mean that general economic justice is not due to Africa now. But memory would seem an indispensable precondition to justice—whether justice implies reparations (as is currently being debated) or other actions.

In Africa there is an understandable reluctance to assume a share of the blame for the Atlantic slave trade, coupled with reticence about slavery in Africa itself; an outsider making inquiries may get answers that are "terse, surly and not very informative."[161] Discourse about slavery in Africa is, according to Manning, all too often characterized by half-truths designed to protect the reputations of slave sellers (*SAL*, 102). Numerous African scholars have in turn voiced resistance to the dominance of white Western historians in this field and the suspiciously concomitant scaling back of earlier assumptions about the total extent of the Atlantic slave trade (from, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois's "perhaps 15,000,000 in all" to Curtin's 9,566,000).[162] Debates on the numbers of slaves exported are plagued by conflicting assumptions about the relative importance of memory (for Africans) and accuracy (for Westerners).[163] In African literature the panegyric

oral tradition, carried over into written forms, encourages "silencing that which is to be silenced."[164] In the French Caribbean, as in the United States, the remains of a society organized around slavery are everywhere, and the Francophone literature is full of allusions to slavery, but there is still a certain silence about the slave trade, stemming from the nature of the Middle Passage itself. Glissant wrote in *Le Quatrième siècle*: "Suffering found itself mute, as did hatred. Death, mute. Mute also the tragedy [*drame*] hatched in the delirium of the hold."[165] And forty years later Chamoiseau makes this observation about French Antillean culture: "Stories of slavery do not fascinate us. Little literature is devoted to it. However, here, in these bitter lands of sugar, we feel submerged by this web of memories which scorch us with things forgotten and screaming presences."[166]

2 AROUND THE TRIANGLE

FROM FRANCE TO AFRICA: THE *MISE HORS*

What exactly were the links that joined France, Africa, and the Caribbean together to make the French Atlantic? In this chapter I will consider some of the practical factors that characterized each of the three journeys constituting the triangular trade, factors that raise in concrete terms some of the symbolic and cultural issues that will be the object of the rest of this study (because these factors created those issues).

From European ports ships set forth loaded with trade goods—cloth (*les indiennes*), bars of iron, pots and pans, alcohol, firearms, and the *pacotille* (countless fine but compact items like crystal, jewelry, and silks).[1] The preparation and outfitting of a slave-trading vessel cost a fortune—by one estimate, this *mise hors* was roughly equivalent to the price of a private palace on the rue Saint-Honoré: two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand *livres*.[2] The main slave-trading ports in France were Nantes (by far the leading city, with 42 percent of the French slave trade), Bordeaux, La Rochelle, and Le Havre. Many of the *négriers* were cosmopolitan Protestants, who formed an endogamous commercial elite. As costs increased in the eighteenth century, it was necessary for a larger number of merchants to invest in the outfitting of a single ship. But each expedition was an independent enterprise, in effect a floating, temporary, intercontinental corporation (C, 44–46, 56; D, 108–9).

The typical French slave-trading vessel of the eighteenth century was eighty or ninety feet long. The ships were not specially built for the triangular trade; they generally had three masts and three decks, the *entrepont* being reserved for cargo and slaves. Ships were often named so as to profess a clear conscience—*Notre-Dame-de-la-Pitié*, *Marie-Joseph*—or to dis-

play up-to-date Enlightenment credentials: *Le Jean-Jacques*, *Le Franklin*, *Le Voltaire* (a ship that will be seen in the next chapter), and even *Le Contrat social*.[3] I will return in the next chapter to the vexed relations between these two accomplishments of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment and the slave trade.

The captain was in charge of the entire commercial operation once the ship left home; he had a financial stake in the success of the voyage and could possibly get very rich after only two or three successful triangular voyages (C, 64). The voyage from France to Africa took ninety to one hundred days (C, 110). European traders were not able to venture far from the coast into the African interior. As David Eltis points out, since the Europeans could not go inside Africa, and the African traders could not (and would not have wanted to) cross the Atlantic, only the captives crossed the boundary represented by the African littoral (E, 154). They alone would see the full reality of two worlds; they would ultimately tie those worlds together.

The time spent buying slaves on the coasts was dangerous and had to be kept to a minimum, lest supplies run out and diseases be contracted. Shipboard rebellions "were most common while the ships were anchored off the coast, waiting to complete their cargo" (*SAL*, 111). The popular image of the slave trade is of a European ship docking at a European fort on the coast of Africa and loading large numbers of captives all at once. The symbolic power of a building such as the Slave House on Gorée Island in Senegal—with its infamous "Door of No Return" overlooking the water—is overwhelming.[4] But the historical record makes clear that such European points of concentration rarely held large numbers of captives who could be bought at one time (C, 118). Captains bought slaves as best they could, day by day, at various points up and down the coasts of Africa. It could easily take six months to fill a ship with captives.[5]

A vessel called the *Suzanne-Marguerite* left La Rochelle in December of 1774 and traded on the coast of Africa through the following October. Taking on as many as seventy-one captives in a single day, the ship nonetheless could go for two weeks without a single new captive; it took nearly eight months to accumulate 566 captives in the hold, meaning that some of those people were held prisoner on the ship for all those months before beginning the torture of the Middle Passage.[6] Olaudah Equiano tells us exactly what it was like during that time: "The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time. . . . The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dy-

ing, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable" (OE, 40–41). Baquaqua describes how "the loathsomeness and filth of that horrible place [the hold of the slave ship] will never be erased from my memory."[7]

SLAVERY IN AFRICA AND THE ATLANTIC CONSENSUS

Before returning to the practical aspects of the trade and describing the second stage of the triangle, I would like to consider some of the motivations and cultural factors that governed the slave-trading encounters that took place between Europeans and Africans on the coast of Africa. It was in bargaining over the sale of captives that Europeans and Africans formed relationships and developed impressions of each other; this trade had profound effects on each side, corrupting any potential that might have existed for nonviolent and equitable relations between the continents. Still, the slave trade was a *trade*, in all senses of that ambiguous term: a transaction in which two parties collaborated (Europeans and Africans), yet in which one "milked" the other, and a movement from one place to another.

Olaudah Equiano reveals much about attitudes toward slavery on all points of the Atlantic triangle, and of course his bestselling book was designed to alter those attitudes. Equiano says that he was born to a slave-owning family in what is now part of Nigeria, then kidnapped and enslaved in Africa around 1756 before being sold across the Atlantic. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* was first published in England in 1789; it is "one of the first points of contact between African narrative and Western print culture" and an indispensable source of insight.[8] Equiano provides a dual perspective, speaking in defense of slavery in Africa (until it happens to him), then bearing witness to the horror of the Middle Passage. Equiano's autobiography reveals certain aspects of the consensus about slavery that dominated the Atlantic world until the late eighteenth century, even as he sheds light on the feelings of those who were victimized by this system. His narrative both explains and helps to unravel the consensus.

First he defends the Ibo people's practice of selling slaves: "Sometimes, indeed, we sold slaves to ["Oye-Eboe" traders], but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, and some other crimes, which we esteemed heinous" (OE, 24). So